When death approaches

Knowing what to expect as death approaches can help make this time less worrying. This information sheet describes the symptoms that commonly occur when someone is near the end of their life, provides practical advice for when a person is dying at home and explains what might happen afterwards. Each person is unique, and these symptoms may not occur in every instance, nor will they necessarily happen in any particular order.

Sleep

In the final stages of illness, most people feel content to stay in bed and may spend more time sleeping. At times, they may not respond to you or it may be hard to wake them.

What to do

- Communicate at times when the person seems most alert.
- Never assume that they cannot hear; so continue talking to them.

Food and fluids

It is common for a person to have little interest in eating or drinking in the final stages of their life. Dehydration is not usually a problem as the body adapts to the reduced intake of fluids.

What to do

- Do not offer food or fluid if a person is unable to swallow as this may cause distress.
- Ice chips or a straw or sipper cup can help a person swallow small amounts of fluids.
- Provide mouth swabs soaked in iced water or fruit juice to help keep their mouth moist.
- Some form of lip balm or moisturiser is also useful to prevent dry, chapped lips.

Skin

The person's nose, ears, hands and feet may feel cooler. Sometimes the skin may look flushed and the hands, feet and on the underside of the body may become discoloured or blotchy.

What to do

- Apply a cool, moist cloth to the forehead.
- Have blankets to hand to provide extra warmth.

Breathing patterns

The person's breathing may become more and more irregular as the respiratory system slows.

What to do

Changes in breathing can be a sign that the person is approaching death.

- Contact family/whānau members who might wish to be present at the time of death.

Noisy breathing

Saliva and mucus may increase as the person becomes too weak to cough or swallow.

What to do

- Help the person sit up a little or turn them to one side.
- Mouth care may help.
- The person's doctor or nurse may suggest a medication that may help.

Confusion

The person may become confused about time, place and the identity of familiar people.

What to do

- Talk to them calmly to reassure them.
- Identify yourself by name each new time you address them.
- Use a night light and keep familiar objects in the room.

Restlessness and agitation

These symptoms usually occur when a person has become semi-conscious. Signs include twitching, plucking at the air or at bedclothes, trying to get out of bed even if the person is unable to stand alone and moaning or calling out constantly. Many families/whānau find this time difficult because they feel unsure how to help. Restlessness may be due to treatable causes, such as, constipation or a full bladder, or the irreversible effects of the person's disease.

What to do

- Keep the person calm by sitting with them and speaking to them reassuringly.
- Quiet music, radio or aromatherapy can be soothing.
- Always assume that the person can hear you and that they will find your voice comforting.
- Help the person change their position, provide mouth care or help them with toileting. Their doctor may prescribe a muscle relaxant.

Loss of bowel and bladder control

This may occur when a person is close to death.

What to do

- Use continence pads and sheets to maintain the person's comfort.
- A catheter to drain fluid may be required.

When death occurs

The person will be unresponsive and not breathing, there will be no visible pulse or heartbeat and the facial muscles will relax, with the mouth and eyes falling open slightly.

What to do

- There is no rush to do anything immediately. You may wish to spend time with the person.
- It is helpful to note the time of death.
- Contact your nurse. If death occurs during the night, then it is OK to wait until the morning.
- The person's GP must visit to confirm a death at home and write a death certificate.
- Most people contact a funeral director (through the Yellow Pages or an internet).
- There may be many people to notify. Consider delegating this task to family/whānau or friends.